

ChatGPT Referral Traffic: Data, Analysis & 2026 Projections

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Executive Summary

The rise of ChatGPT and other generative AI chatbots is beginning to reshape how users find and navigate online information. Already, ChatGPT is acting not just as an information source but as a traffic referrer. However, analytic studies consistently show that ChatGPT currently contributes only a very small fraction of referral traffic to most websites – typically well under 1% of a site's visits, even in fast-growing segments. For example, industry analyses through 2024–2025 found ChatGPT sending roughly 0.1–0.5% of traffic to leading news and media sites (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com) (Source: datareportal.com), and on the order of 0.3–0.5% of organic-search volume for major sites like Wikipedia, Samsung, and Amazon (Source: datareportal.com). In an SMB dataset, ChatGPT referrals amounted to only 0.54% of organic traffic in September 2024, rising to about 1.24% by February 2025 (Source: searchengineland.com). Projections suggest that even with continued rapid growth in AI usage, ChatGPT's share of referral traffic by 2026 will remain in the single-digit percentage range for most websites. For example, one industry forecast concluded that current AI-driven channels (chiefly ChatGPT) account for only ~0.5% of all site visits (June 2025) (Source: ppc.land). Even if ChatGPT usage doubles or triples, it will still likely deliver only a few percent of typical sites' visits by 2026, except in specific niches where AI is unusually prominent.

Key Findings: (1) Current referral share is very low. Leading studies in 2024–25 uniformly report ChatGPT contributing well under 1% of total or organic traffic for most publishers (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com) (Source: datareportal.com). (2) Rapid growth, but small base. The absolute number of visits from ChatGPT has doubled or more in recent quarters (e.g. an 8× increase to U.S. publishers in H1 2025 (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com) and roughly doubled from Jan to Apr 2025 (Source: digiday.com), but since the starting point was near-zero, it still represents only tiny shares of traffic. (3) Industry variations. ChatGPT referrals are highly concentrated in certain sectors. Education, technology, and travel sites see higher Al-sourced traffic, whereas sectors like health or e-commerce often get less from ChatGPT and more from other Al engines (Gemini, Perplexity, etc.) (Source: searchengineland.com). (4) Engagement remains high. Although scarce, ChatGPT-originating visitors tend to be more engaged and convert better than some other channels (Source: blackbeanmarketing.com). (5) Projections to 2026: Given current trends (roughly 1–2× growth per year in ChatGPT referrals) and continued declines in organic search visibility,



most forecasts place ChatGPT referral share at only *low single-digit* percentages for average sites by 2026 (often well under 5%) (Source: searchengineland.com) (Source: ppc.land). Even bold predictions (e.g. ChatGPT equaling Google by 2030 (Source: ppc.land) imply a gradual rise over multiple years.

In summary, while ChatGPT is already emerging as a new traffic referrer, its share of visits to most websites is still negligible today and expected to remain modest through 2026. The main near-term impact of ChatGPT on web traffic appears to be a rebalancing of who gets clicks (favoring highly authoritative or well-structured sites (Source: arxiv.org) and an ongoing discussion of how content creators and marketers should adapt (so-called "Al citation optimization" and new SEO strategies (Source: arxiv.org) (Source: blackbeanmarketing.com). As we document below, a wide range of data sources confirms these trends, even as experts debate longer-term outcomes.

1. Introduction and Background

The emergence of ChatGPT (OpenAl's conversational generative AI) and similar LLM-powered chatbots has raised fundamental questions about the future of online search and website traffic sources. Historically, most website visitors came via organic search (e.g. Google, Bing), direct entry (bookmarks, typing URLs), or referrals from other sites (social media, newsletters, partner sites, etc.). With ChatGPT, a new referrer effectively appears: when a user asks ChatGPT a question, the AI may generate a text answer that includes factual information or even source citations. If the user then clicks a link in the ChatGPT interface (for example, via the "Docs" or "Browsing" plugin, or if ChatGPT's answers are copied into a browser), that visit shows up in analytics as referred by "chatgpt.com." This development means websites can begin measuring ChatGPT referral traffic in their analytics platforms for the first time.

This report examines existing data and projections to estimate what share of overall website traffic (particularly *referral traffic*) is coming from ChatGPT, and how that might evolve by 2026. We cover historical context (the rise of ChatGPT and early indications from 2023–2025), current trends (2024–2025 data from analytics firms and publishers), and possible future scenarios. We use extensive third-party data and studies to ground our analysis. Wherever possible, claims are backed by industry reports or published research (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com) (Source: dataeroptal.com) (Source: searchenginejournal.com).

Key definitions for clarity: **Referral traffic** typically refers to visitors arriving on a website via a link on another domain (distinct from "direct" or "search"). In this context, we specifically focus on *referrals from ChatGPT* – i.e. visits originating when a user interacts with ChatGPT and then follows a link or clicks out. We compare this new source against more established channels and measure it against each site's overall traffic. Throughout, "share of referral traffic from ChatGPT" means the proportion of a site's visits (or of all referral visits) that can be attributed to ChatGPT.

This analysis is timely because chatbots like ChatGPT have seen explosive adoption: by late 2025, ChatGPT usage had soared to hundreds of millions of users per month (Source: searchengineland.com) (Source: datareportal.com). This raises concern and interest among web publishers and marketers: will ChatGPT replace search engines and steal traffic, or will it drive new users to websites? </current_article_content>Early indicators (discussed below) show both some traffic is indeed being sent to sites, but also that the lion's share of queries still yield no click (so-called "zero-click" answers) (Source: techcrunch.com) (Source: datareportal.com). Governments, analysts, and major companies (Google, Microsoft) are closely watching this shift.

Our report proceeds as follows:

- Section 2 (Historical Context): Reviews how web traffic evolved, the role of search engines, and the rise of generative AI in search beginning in 2023–2024.
- Section 3 (Methodology): Explains how ChatGPT referral traffic is measured (analytics tools, data sources, definitions).
- Section 4 (Current Trends, 2023–2025): Presents data on ChatGPT referral volumes and growth to date, across industries and website types (general web, news publishers, SMBs, e-commerce, etc.). Includes a detailed review of published studies and metrics.
- Section 5 (Case Studies/Examples): Examines specific examples of ChatGPT's impact e.g. major publishers (NY Post, Guardian, Reuters),
 SMB sites, etc., with real or illustrative statistics.
- Section 6 (Analysis and Implications): Discusses what these data trends imply for website owners, SEO strategy, and content creators. Covers
 the "white hat" tactics emerging for ChatGPT (so-called AI optimization techniques) and the varying viewpoints on whether ChatGPT is a threat or
 an opportunity.
- Section 7 (Future Directions and 2026 Projections): Explores plausible scenarios and expert forecasts, projecting ChatGPT's referral share in 2026 for generic websites, and discusses factors that could accelerate or inhibit that growth (user adoption, technology changes, content licensing, legal actions, integration with other platforms, etc.)
- Section 8 (Conclusion): Summarizes findings and offers concluding observations.



Throughout, we anchor statements with metrics and quotes from industry reports, SEO publications, and data firms. For example, Similarweb and Semrush analyses provide quantitative benchmarks of ChatGPT traffic today (Source: searchengineland.com) (Source: www.similarweb.com), Statcounter gives global referral share (Source: www.prnewswire.com), and publishers (TechCrunch, Digiday) report on news traffic specifically (Source: techcrunch.com) (Source: digiday.com). Together these form the evidence base for estimating the ChatGPT referral share in 2026.

2. Historical Context: Search and the Rise of Generative AI

To understand ChatGPT's impact, it helps to recall the pre-Al era of web traffic. For decades, **search engines** (largely Google) have been the dominant way users find websites. Businesses optimized their content for Google's rankings (SEO) to capture clicks. In Google's own data: by late 2024 Google had about 6.5 billion unique monthly users, dwarfing ChatGPT's ~566 million (Dec 2024) (Source: <u>searchengineland.com</u>). In Google search, a high fraction of queries resulted in a click to a site: historically around 50–60% of queries ended with the user visiting one of Google's listed pages. (The rest were "no-click" – the user got enough info from, say, a featured snippet, or abandoned, etc.)

This began to change in 2024. Google introduced **AI Overviews** (also called the "AI Model" or "AI-Powered Search"), which generated concise answers at the top of search results. Meta reported that these Overviews led to higher "no-click" rates: for some news categories, the fraction of searches yielding zero click-throughs jumped from ~56% to ~69% by mid-2025 (Source: techcrunch.com). In other words, users got more info on Google's page itself, without clicking to publisher sites. This phenomenon (termed *visibility inflation* by some analysts (Source: ppc.land) has raised concerns that traditional SEO will lose its traffic-driving power.

Simultaneously, stand-alone AI chatbots like **ChatGPT** became publicly available (ChatGPT was released Nov. 30, 2022). In early 2023, millions of users began using ChatGPT to answer questions, write content, code, etc. ChatGPT's usage skyrocketed (reports indicate weekly active users grew from about 50 million in Jan 2023 to 400 million by Feb 2025 (Source: www.linkedin.com). With such a user base, it was inevitable that some web browsing would occur through ChatGPT. A turning point came when OpenAI added a live web-browsing (search) capability to ChatGPT (late 2023) and later when Microsoft integrated GPT-based chat into Bing. This meant ChatGPT answers could be sourced from up-to-date websites, and could include citations/links.

Early observers noted that contrary to initial fears, ChatGPT did indeed send some users to websites. For example, OfficeChai (Aug 2023) reported that traffic from "chatgpt.com" began appearing in Google Analytics for various sites (Source: officechai.com). Even standalone Al tools like Perplexity.ai were linking to sources. This signaled a new channel of referrals: Al-driven referrals.

At the same time, concerns grew that ChatGPT might be stealing news traffic. In mid-2024, similarweb and others documented dramatic drops in organic search traffic to news publishers, coinciding with the rise of Al Overviews. TechCrunch reported that Google image plan changes had increased no-clicks to nearly 69% by May 2025 (Source: techcrunch.com), and organic traffic to news sites fell from over 2.3 billion visits (peak mid-2024) to under 1.7 billion by mid-2025 (Source: techcrunch.com). This raised fears among publishers that the content they produced would be consumed by Al tools without clicks.

However, supplemental data began to show ChatGPT also referring traffic *to* publishers. Similarweb documented that ChatGPT referrals (while tiny in absolute terms) were growing (e.g. 0.435 million in Aug 2024 to 3.5 million in Jan 2025 for 14 top news sites (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com). Digiday reported ChatGPT's share of outbound traffic going to news sites jumped from 64% in Jan 2025 to 83% by April 2025 (Source: digiday.com). At the same time, marketing analyses (Siege, SearchEngineLand, Similarweb) started tracking ChatGPT referral volumes by sector. These all paint a consistent picture: ChatGPT as a new referrer is real and growing, but as of 2024–2025 it is still a very small channel compared to search. The rest of this report digs into the finer detail of these findings.

3. Measuring ChatGPT Referral Traffic

Understanding referral traffic from ChatGPT requires some care in analytics. By design, ChatGPT is not a conventional "website" – it is typically accessed through an app or portal (e.g. chat.openai.com or the ChatGPT mobile app). When it provides answers or cites sources, the user might click on a link it presents. In those cases, the HTTP referrer (if any) is usually chat.openai.com or similar. Thus web analytics tools can attribute such clicks to ChatGPT as the referrer domain. For example, Similarweb's AI Traffic Tracker uses global clickstream data to count visits originating from ChatGPT or other AI domains (Source: www.similarweb.com). Statcounter likewise tracks referrals from chatbots. Publishers who license ChatGPT (e.g. The Guardian) may have custom code to track ChatGPT clicks.

However, this only captures *explicit* clicks via ChatGPT's interface. ChatGPT can also deliver answers via voice assistants or other apps, which may not produce a clear referrer. And if ChatGPT simply answers a question without needing a website, there is no referral at all. Therefore, metrics based on referrer data systematically **underestimate** the role of ChatGPT in satisfying user queries. Despite this, referral-based measures are valuable to gauge the *external links* ChatGPT is providing.



Most publicly cited data on ChatGPT referrals come from two sources: (1) Analytics firms' aggregates (Semrush, Similarweb, Chartbeat, Statcounter) that report what fraction of visits to domains originate from chatgpt.com or other AI platforms. For example, Similarweb estimated the total ChatGPT-originating visits to the top 1000 sites (June 2025) at ~0.9 billion (Source: www.similarweb.com), and Statcounter measured ChatGPT's market share among AI-chat referrals at ~79.8% (May 2025) (Source: www.prnewswire.com). (In all these data, it's clear that ChatGPT is by far the leading AI referrer – often >>80% of "AI bot" traffic, ahead of Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity, Claude, etc. (Source: www.prnewswire.com).) (2) Publisher case studies and news reports providing specific numbers for particular sites or categories. For instance, TechCrunch obtained Similarweb figures on referral trends for news publishers, and Search Engine Journal reported the absolute numbers for 14 news sites (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com). Agencies like Siege Media have done sample analyses on hundreds of SMB sites' GA data. These sector-specific reports give context on industry patterns.

Limitations

While these datapoints are invaluable, we must be mindful of limitations:

- Sampling and scope. Most data come from either top-tier publishers or convenience samples. Similarweb's reports often use the "top 1,000" or specific industries, which skews toward large sites. SMB studies cover hundreds of smaller companies but may not be globally representative.
- Definitions. Some analyses (e.g. Ahmed's or Andrew Charlton's) conflate "ChatGPT session users" with "users referred." We focus specifically
 on actual clicks (measurable visits) attributable to ChatGPT.
- Rapid change. This is an evolving space. The introduction of new GPT features (like OpenAl's Browse tool, or GPT-4 Vision) or competitors
 could dramatically alter referral patterns even by 2026. We incorporate the latest available data (mostly late 2024 mid 2025) but emphasize
 uncertainty beyond.

Despite these caveats, the convergence of multiple independent sources (Similarweb, \$SE J, Digiday, Statcounter, etc.) gives confidence in the main conclusions we draw. We now turn to a detailed analysis of what the data say about ChatGPT's share of referral traffic.

4. ChatGPT Referral Traffic (2023-2025): Data and Trends

4.1 Overall Growth and Magnitude

Since ChatGPT's launch, analysts have noted a **sharp rise** in the absolute number of referrals it generates, even though the base remains small. For example, a Similarweb analysis covering January–April 2025 found ChatGPT referrals to news websites nearly *doubled* in four months (Source: <u>digiday.com</u>). Search Engine Journal reported that referrals to 14 major news publishers grew from ~0.435 million in Aug 2024 to 3.5 million by Jan 2025 (an **eightfold increase** in six months) (Source: <u>www.searchenginejournal.com</u>). Likewise, a Search Engine Land study of 391 SMB sites observed that total generative-Al referrals (mostly ChatGPT) rose **123**% from September 2024 to February 2025 (Source: <u>searchengineland.com</u>).

Figure 1 (hypothetical) illustrates this trend: ChatGPT referral sessions remain very small (in the tens of thousands per site, for a generic web property), but their growth rate has been on the order of 100% or more annually. As one marketing commentator noted, ChatGPT's Weekly Active Users exploded from 50M in early 2023 to 800M by late 2025 (Source: www.linkedin.com); proportionally, referral clicks have grown too (albeit from a tinier base).

While the growth rates are impressive (doubling or tripling in under a year), **absolute volumes are still minimal** relative to traditional channels. As Siege Media summarized their August 2024—Feb 2025 data: "the share of AI referral traffic to organic traffic has increased by 130%... but the share is still relatively small" (Source: <u>searchengineland.com</u>). Even after substantial growth, ChatGPT referrals in early 2025 were only on the order of 0.5—1.5% of organic search volume for SMB sites (Source: <u>searchengineland.com</u>).

The Similarweb "Al Referral Traffic" report (July 2025) puts Al (and ChatGPT) referrals in context: it estimated **1.13 billion** total visits from *all* Al platforms (June 2025), of which ~80% (~0.9B) were from ChatGPT (Source: www.similarweb.com). (Source: www.similarweb.com). In other words, Al referrals are a tiny fraction of search referrals (roughly 0.6% of Google's volume) as of mid-2025. Even though Al referrals grew 357% year-over-year (Source: www.similarweb.com), the starting base was so small that **they still only amount to ~0.6% of Google's traffic**.

Sector-Specific Growth

The growth rate of ChatGPT referrals has varied by industry. Published reports highlight two broad trends: generative AI referrals are growing especially fast in B2B and knowledge sectors, and some industries show anomalously high growth.



- News and Media: This sector has been under intense scrutiny. HuntFor example, Similarweb and media outlets agree: ChatGPT referrals to news publishers were nearly negligible in early 2024 but skyrocketed by early 2025. Digiday reported an increase from 123 million visits (Jan 2025) to 243.8 million (Apr 2025) across 250 news sites (Source: digiday.com) an ~98% rise. However, relative to each site's traffic, the share remained below 1%: SEJ found ChatGPT <0.1% of total visits for most in Jan 2025 (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com), with the exception of some tabloids (New York Post reached 0.5% (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com). TechCrunch notes that despite these gains, declining SEO meant ChatGPT referrals weren't offsetting big traffic losses to Google AI answers (Source: techcrunch.com).</p>
- Technology/Education/Finance/Travel: According to Semrush (via Search Engine Land), education and tech sites have seen a disproportionate
 ChatGPT traffic boost (Source: searchengineland.com). Indeed, more than 30,000 unique domains got ChatGPT referrals by Nov 2024, with tech
 and education leading. Similarly, the SMB study found that travel and finance sites attracted higher ChatGPT referral volumes than others
 (Source: searchengineland.com). These are sectors where question-answer and detailed info is valued.
- Healthcare/E-commerce: By contrast, sectors like healthcare or e-commerce have seen more growth from AI engines other than ChatGPT (e.g. Google's Gemini or Perplexity.ai) (Source: searchengineland.com). ChatGPT referrals here grew, but not as quickly. For example, in Similarweb's category breakdown (June 2025), the top "health" site (nih.gov) got 3.9M ChatGPT visits, but giant reference/wiki sites were even higher (Source: www.similarweb.com). Overall, industries still gravitate toward search engines or affiliate channels more than ChatGPT for purchase-intent queries (Source: searchengineland.com) (Source: ppc.land).

Comparison to Other Channels

Analysts have begun comparing ChatGPT referrals to other channels. For instance, a Search Engine Land study of 973 e-commerce sites found ChatGPT accounted for only ~0.2% of sessions (about 200 times smaller than Google organic) (Source: searchengineland.com). Social media referrals and traditional search still dominate conversions in retail. Conversely, ChatGPT referrals had higher engagement (lower bounce, more pages) than average (Source: searchengineland.com), but their low volume meant even excellent conversion rates couldn't rival the sheer scale of search or email. In fact, among shopping channels, only paid social had worse conversion than ChatGPT (Source: searchengineland.com) (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample of referral volumes from ChatGPT vs Organic search (August 2025)

WEBSITE	ORGANIC SEARCH VISITS (AUG 2025)	CHATGPT REFERRALS (AUG 2025)	CHATGPT AS % OF ORGANIC
Wikipedia.org	3,200,000,000	9,700,000	0.30%
NYTimes.com	207,200,000	222,400	0.11%
Samsung.com	371,600,000	1,800,000	0.48%
Amazon.com	623,600,000	3,200,000	0.51%

Source: DataReportal (2025), based on Similarweb data (Source: <u>datareportal.com</u>). Figures illustrate that even leading domains received ChatGPT-sourced visits in the low millions (and fractional percentages of their search traffic) as of mid-2025.

As Table 1 (from DataReportal/Semrush) shows, ChatGPT was responsible for only a few million visits to giant sites in August 2025, translating to sub1% shares. For example, ChatGPT's contributions were just ~0.3% of Wikipedia's organic traffic and ~0.5% of Samsung's or Amazon's (Source:
datareportal.com). Similar results held across other categories: reference and search (wikipedia, Google), tech (GitHub 6.6M ChatGPT referrals),
news (Yahoo1.8M), etc. (Source: www.similarweb.com). In every measured case, organic search remained the overwhelming source of traffic. The
Summary in DataReportal bluntly states: "Al platforms deliver less than 1% of the web traffic that organic search currently delivers" (Source:
datareportal.com).

Share of Al-Driven Referrals

Within the realm of all Al-powered referrals, ChatGPT is by far the leader. Statcounter's mid-2025 data show ChatGPT commanding about **79.8%** of global referrals from Al chatbots (with Perplexity at ~11.8%, Microsoft Copilot ~5.2%, etc.) (Source: www.prnewswire.com). Similarweb likewise notes that ChatGPT makes up roughly 80% of Al referrals to top domains (Source: www.similarweb.com). This means discussions of "Al referrals" are largely interchangeable with ChatGPT's impact.



Nevertheless, *AI referrals themselves are still a small slice of total web referrals*. For context, Similarweb estimated total AI referrals (all engines combined) were 1.13 billion in June 2025 (Source: www.similarweb.com), which is minute next to Google's ~191 billion in the same month (Source: www.similarweb.com). Thus ChatGPT's ~0.9B referrals correspond to only about 0.47% of Google's. In other words, **ChatGPT is the leading AI referrer, but AI as a group is still <1% of the market** (Source: www.similarweb.com).

Key Takeaways (2023-2025)

Summarizing the data to date:

- Absolute referrals are growing fast (100–200% YoY in many cases) but from near-zero. Many sites saw 8× year-over-year jumps in ChatGPT traffic (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com), but this typically raised their traffic share only from ~0.01% to ~0.1% of total sessions.
- Current shares are almost negligible for most sites. Analyses of publishers and SMBs consistently find ChatGPT ~0.1–1% of visits (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com) (Source: searchenginejand.com), with exceptions only among a few sites (NY Post at 0.5%, some tech sites near 1%)
- High engagement, low volume.
 Multiple sources note ChatGPT users are highly engaged (longer sessions, more conversions (Source: blackbeanmarketing.com), yet the traffic volume is too small to drive comparable revenue to Google Search.
- Dominant where relevant. ChatGPT's referrals are concentrated in queries suited to chat/AI (e.g. factual, technical, long-form content). It is not
 replacing search across the board. For example, finance/travel sites saw larger ChatGPT traffic jumps than social media or affiliate-heavy sectors
 (Source: searchengineland.com).
- Al vs. traditional. Even as ChatGPT grows, traditional organic and paid search remain far larger referral sources. The large majority of clicks to content still come from Google/Bing. ChatGPT's impact in absolute terms is minuscule by comparison (Source: www.similarweb.com) (Source: searchengineland.com).

These observations form the basis for estimating future share. In the next sections we examine specific examples in more detail and discuss implications, then extrapolate to 2026.

5. Case Studies and Examples

We now turn to concrete examples illustrating ChatGPT's impact. While systematic data (above) covers overall patterns, specific case studies highlight how ChatGPT referrals vary by website type.

5.1 News and media publishers: News sites have borne the brunt of *both* declines in search traffic and interest in AI referrals. Studies indicate that from Jan–May 2024 to Jan–May 2025, ChatGPT-driven visits to news sites rose sharply: from under 1 million to over 25 million (a 25× increase) (Source: techcrunch.com). This explosive growth came as Google web search traffic to news fell by hundreds of millions (from ~2.3B to ~1.7B) (Source: techcrunch.com). Despite these changes, ChatGPT's *share* of traffic on news sites remains extremely small. Search Engine Journal reported that in Jan 2025, ChatGPT accounted for **less than 0.1%** of total traffic at 14 leading news publishers (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com) (Figure 1). Only one outlier – the New York Post – saw ChatGPT reach about **0.5%** of its visits (760,000 out of 143.5M) (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com). Other big news brands saw similar click counts but larger totals – e.g. Guardian and Forbes each received on the order of 0.5–0.7 million ChatGPT referrals, still well under 1% of their traffic (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com).

Even within news, results vary. Subscription-based publishers have been cautious about ChatGPT; some (NY Times, Wall Street Journal) have blocked ChatGPT from scraping their content, likely further limiting referrals. By contrast, The Guardian (which has an OpenAl licensing deal) and Reuters (no license, but technical audiences) saw larger gains: Digiday reports each got ~1.5 million ChatGPT-sourced visits in April 2025 (Source: digiday.com). BBC and Fox News saw triple-digit percentage increases in ChatGPT referrals from Jan–Apr 2025 (BBC +189%, Fox +166%) (Source: digiday.com). But again, these millions still represent fractions of their multi-million print: for example, Reuters alone might have on the order of 1–2% of its traffic from ChatGPT (if comparable to Guardian) – a small but growing slice.

5.2 Small/Medium Business websites: In the Search Engine Land SMB study, 391 small-to-mid-sized sites (across industries) were tracked via GA. The average picture confirms the above: ChatGPT referrals grew rapidly but stayed under a few percent. From Sep 2024 to Feb 2025, Al-driven referrals (mostly ChatGPT) rose 123% Python, but went from only 0.54% to 1.24% of organic traffic (Source: searchengineland.com). Put differently, in late 2024 an SMB site might have seen ChatGPT equate to ~0.5% of what it gets from Google search; by spring 2025 this might be ~1.2%. This jump is notable as a trend, but in absolute terms equates to a tiny share of sessions (often <2%). The study found **ChatGPT was consistently the largest Al referrer** for these sites, while other Al bots like Perplexity or Gemini appeared only in niche verticals (Source: searchengineland.com).



Even high-growth content businesses see similar fractions. The BlackBean Marketing agency (which advises B2B companies) observed that ChatGPT referrals were a "tiny segment" of their clients' traffic, albeit a highly valuable one (Source: blackbeanmarketing.com). They note that for 16 large B2B sites they manage, ChatGPT-sourced visitors had double the session duration and 33% higher conversion than the average visitor (Source: blackbeanmarketing.com). Yet the fact that so few agency resources are devoted to ChatGPT suggests the volume is small. Indeed, anecdotally most websites report that ChatGPT traffic is currently just a rounding error in their analytics.

- **5.3 E-commerce sites:** A late-2025 study of nearly 1,000 e-commerce stores shows ChatGPT referrals remain negligible to date (Source: searchengineland.com). Over a year (Aug 2024–July 2025), ChatGPT drove only ~0.2% of all sessions, a figure dwarfed by Google (organic) and even email or affiliates (Source: searchengineland.com). ChatGPT conversions were also low compared to organic search (Source: searchengineland.com). The practical takeaway is that online retailers are not yet getting significant sales or traffic directly from ChatGPT. Most e-commerce sites still depend almost entirely on Google, ads, and direct.
- **5.4 Education/Technical sites:** By contrast, sites focused on learning or technical Q&A appear more likely to get ChatGPT links. The Search Engine Land piece notes education and software development sites got a notable boost from ChatGPT referrals (Source: searchengineland.com). For instance, the Similarweb category data show researchgate.net (education/research) receiving 3.2M ChatGPT visits in June 2025, and Wikipedia 9.2M (Source: www.similarweb.com) (though Wikipedia queries often come from Google as well). Github.com (tech) received 6.6M, and StackOverflow is often cited by GPT for coding questions (though we lack published figures here). Anecdotally, sites like Khan Academy or tutorial blogs have begun noticing ChatGPT-sourced views. This makes sense: ChatGPT excels at summary information, so any site with well-structured facts or tutorials is likely to be linked if the AI finds it relevant.
- **5.5 Conversion and Quality:** One surprisingly consistent finding is that traffic from ChatGPT tends to be *high-quality* in engagement terms. The BlackBean report noted ChatGPT visitors had longer sessions and more conversions than average (Source: <u>blackbeanmarketing.com</u>). Similarly, Ahrefs data (summarized by PPC.land) found that users coming from AI search had **23× higher conversion rates** than ordinary organic searchers (Source: <u>ppc.land</u>) and were worth ~4.4× more in lifetime value (Source: <u>ppc.land</u>). This suggests that while ChatGPT's numbers are small, the people it does send to a site are highly interested (often looking for specific answers or purchases). This echoes early SEO-era observations that traffic can be "qualified" and valuable regardless of volume.

Table 2: ChatGPT Referrals (June 2025) for Selected Categories

CATEGORY	EXAMPLE TOP SITE	CHATGPT REFERRALS (JUNE 2025)	COMMENT
Tech/Search/Social	google.com	29.3M	Al Referral leader (Source: www.similarweb.com)
Video/Entertainment	youtube.com	27.2M	
E-commerce	amazon.com	4.0M	
Reference/Academic	wikipedia.org	9.2M	
News & Media	yahoo.com	1.8M	Largest non-portal media (Source: www.similarweb.com)

Source: Similarweb category report (Source: www.similarweb.com), illustrating that Google, YouTube, Amazon, and Wikipedia alone each receive several million ChatGPT visits per month (June 2025).

Taken together, these cases reinforce that **ChatGPT referrals today are modest in absolute volume and typically under 1% of traffic even at large sites**. Only in a few instances (NY Post, some tech domains) have we seen ChatGPT approach roughly 0.5–1% of traffic. More commonly, it is well below 0.1%. In contrast, *all other channels* (search, social, direct, affiliates, etc.) account for the overwhelming majority of referrals. Therefore, while ChatGPT's influence is growing and is visible to site owners, it is not yet a dominant source for most.

6. Implications and Adaptations

What does this mean for website owners, marketers, and the broader digital ecosystem? The data above suggest the following implications:



Preserving SEO vs. Al optimization: Many content creators have felt alarmed by the prospect that ChatGPT could "steal" their search traffic. To date, however, it seems ChatGPT is more *complementing* than replacing search clicks. A site can lose some search visits but gain some Al visits, but the net effect depends on content and context. For general SEO advice, most of the fundamentals still apply – good content, proper indexing, etc. – because Google and others remain the main channels. That said, new strategies are anticipated. SEO commentators have begun talking about "Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)" (Source: arxiv.org): adapting content so that Al tools will cite it. The idea is to make your site the kind of authoritative source that ChatGPT will include in its answers or citations (for example, clear headings, summary sections, structured data). BlackBean's marketers explicitly discuss "Al referral optimization" and wonder if SEO tactics translate to ChatGPT (Source: blackbeanmarketing.com).

Content strategy: The differences in which sites get ChatGPT traffic suggest content matters. Chatbot answers appear biased toward "earned" authoritative sources (Source: arxiv.org). The generative models favor content that fits well with their patterns (predictable, well-written, factual). By one study, ChatGPT prefers to cite websites that match the way it generates language (Source: arxiv.org). This implies that for a website to attract ChatGPT referrals, its content should be comprehensive, clearly written, and easily "understood" by Al. Straightforward Q&A formats, tutorials, or thorough explainers might be more likely to be pulled into ChatGPT's responses. Conversely, highly promotional or user-generated content is less likely to be curated. Publishers might experiment with marking up their pages (schema.org Q&A, for example) so that ChatGPT can readily parse and cite them.

Blocking vs. monetization: Some major content owners have taken contentious positions. The New York Times and others have sought to block ChatGPT's scrapers and possibly cut off referrals, viewing ChatGPT as a competitor. Meanwhile, several groups (Hearst, Dotdash Meredith, Guardian) have inked licensing deals with OpenAl (Source: digiday.com), presumably in exchange for content use and/or referral integration. Those deals suggest a belief that being included in ChatGPT (with proper attribution) is valuable promotional exposure. In practical terms, websites have a choice: lock out Al bots (risk forfeiting any future ChatGPT traffic) or allow/embrace them (and hope to gain referrals and visibility). The early data imply the latter approach may be better: Reuters (which has not licensed) still saw significant ChatGPT traffic, and the Guardian (licensed) saw similar levels (Source: digiday.com). Blocking might keep out ChatGPT now, but if generative Al gains share, it could deny traffic.

E-commerce and marketing: For online retailers, the current takeaway is that ChatGPT isn't yet a major sales channel. However, as shown earlier, ChatGPT senders convert well (Source: ppc.land). Some retailers are experimenting with product data in AI bots (e.g. OpenAI's shopping feature). One TechCrunch report noted ChatGPT shoppers had a 28% YoY increase in December 2025 (Source: techcrunch.com) (though that's year-over-year growth, not share). Marketers are watching whether ChatGPT-driven product recommendations will become a significant referral source. So far, traditional SEM and SEO are still priority, but "AI campaign" budgets are emerging.

User behavior: The advent of ChatGPT may be shifting how people search. As one commentary observed, many ChatGPT prompts do *not* correspond to standard Google search intents (Source: searchengineland.com) – people ask longer, more conversational queries. If more users begin their information journey in a chat interface rather than Google, that could redistribute traffic. If, for example, 20% of young users default to ChatGPT for answers, then even a small fraction clicking out can matter to some websites. The data so far (ChatGPT answering ~54% queries without search (Source: searchengineland.com) suggests a sizable demographic is using it as primary search. For those users, links presented by ChatGPT may shape their web interaction. Publishers and SEO experts thus regard ChatGPT as a growing "channel" akin to voice search or social.

Ethical and open web concerns: Some analysts warn that if ChatGPT (or any AI) replaces too much of the web experience, fewer people will click through to content sites, hurting content monetization models. Others argue ChatGPT can benefit sites by driving new engagement. The data we have points to a mixed outcome: a little bit of both. As one OfficeChai analysis noted, if ChatGPT can partially fill the gap left by disappearing Google clicks, it might be a "win-win" for creators (Source: officechai.com). But that remains to be proven at scale.

7. Projections for 2026 and Beyond

Estimating ChatGPT's referral share in 2026 requires projecting the trends above forward. No source can give a precise number, but we can outline plausible scenarios and assumptions. The factors include:

- User/base growth of ChatGPT: How many people will use AI chat in 2026? Analysts disagree. OpenAI's CEO indicated ~800M weekly users by late 2025, implying nearly 1B monthly as of early 2025 (Source: datareportal.com). NGOs like DataReportal estimate "over 1 billion monthly users" of AI tools in 2025 (Source: datareportal.com). Assuming ChatGPT doubles or more by 2026 (via new features, integrations, global expansion), raw opportunities for referrals rise.
- Referral conversion rate: Currently, only a small fraction of ChatGPT interactions result in a click through to a website. If OpenAI or others
 encourage more sourcing (for monetization or accuracy), that rate could increase. For example, adding more "browsing" plugin users, or requiring
 citations by default, would boost links. Conversely, if OpenAI relies more on direct answers or licensing (e.g. reading content internally), referral
 rates could stagnate.



- Competition from other AI systems: ChatGPT is dominant now, but by 2026 competitors (Anthropic's Claude, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, etc.) might fragment the market. If ChatGPT owns ~80% of AI referrals now (Source: www.prnewswire.com), that might shift. Some of those rivals integrate more deeply with Google or have different referral policies. Most existing data lumps all LLM referrals together (with ChatGPT as the bulk), so a decline in ChatGPT's market share among LLMs could mildly reduce its referrals to sites.
- Publisher strategies: The willingness of site owners to engage with or oppose ChatGPT (licensing, API partnership, blocking) will shape
 outcomes. If most large publishers allow ChatGPT to scrape and cite their content, growth might continue. If many block it (like the Times initially
 did), referrals might be muted even if users ask those topics. So far, a mix of responses is seen.
- Ecosystem shifts: If Google's own AI features further reduce clickthroughs (more "no-click" answers in search), then referrals from Google could decline. A fraction of that lost traffic might find its way to elsewhere, potentially including ChatGPT or other sources. For example, if Google sends 20% fewer visits to certain sites and ChatGPT usage spikes, some of those informational queries might migrate to ChatGPT and eventually result in clicks elsewhere. This channel-shift effect is important: ChatGPT's share will partly depend on how its rise relates to search engines' share dropping.

Given these uncertainties, we consider two broad scenarios for ChatGPT's share of referral traffic by 2026: a "conservative" case and an "optimistic" case (for illustrative purposes):

- Conservative scenario: Current growth slows as ChatGPT's novelty stabilizes. Many users still prefer web search or direct sources. ChatGPT's actual click rate (links out) remains low (<5%). ChatGPT-based referrals keep growing (e.g. doubling annually) but from such a small base that by late 2026 the average website sees only 0.1–0.5% of its traffic from ChatGPT. Even a site optimized for AI answers might only reach ~1–2%. This aligns with skeptics who note ChatGPT's share is presently a rounding error (Source: www.linkedin.com).
- Optimistic scenario: ChatGPT's user base nearly doubles (to ~1.6B monthly by 2026, per one projection (Source: www.linkedin.com). The platform improves citation frequency (more answers show "source links"), and publishers broadly allow access. Al-based search displaces Google significantly (perhaps Google's Al Overviews cut organic referrals by another 10-20%). In that case, ChatGPT referrals could accelerate. Under these assumptions, high-authority sites (tech, academic, news) might see ChatGPT share climb into the single digits (3–5%) of traffic in 2026. Even some mid-tier sites might approach ~2%. For example, if the data graph from Section 4 continue, the SMB ratio of "Al referrals:organic" which was ~1.24% in early 2025 could reasonably double to ~2–3% by late 2026. At the extreme, some analysts have suggested that generative Al could approach parity with Google by the late 2020s (Source: ppc.land), though that is a long-tail outlier prediction.

Importantly, **for "most websites"** (i.e. not just the largest tech/publishing names), even these scenarios imply fairly low shares. In a mid-tier business or local website that now sees 10,000 monthly visits, a 1% ChatGPT share means 100 visits. That is hardly transformative, though it might still justify some attention. Based on the evidence, a reasonable ellapsed estimate is that *in 2026*, the typical website might expect only on the order of 0.1% to a few percent of its traffic from ChatGPT. The higher end of that range likely applies only to sites with content ChatGPT finds most relevant (education, technology, "evergreen" reference guides), whereas a random small business or niche retailer might only see 0.05–0.1%.

To ground this estimate with data: recall our examples in Section 4. The largest sites had ChatGPT referral shares ~0.3–0.5% in mid-2025 (Source: datareportal.com). If user adoption doubles and citations become more common by 2026, these might roughly double in percentage, pushing those sites to 1% or so. In contrast, news sites in Jan 2025 were at ~0.1% (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com); even if they manage 300-400% growth year-over-year, they might still only hit ~1% by 2026. Many real-world projections outside our sources are equally modest. For example, Andrew Charlton (a marketing analyst) projected that with aggressive growth assumptions, ChatGPT referrals would only reach ~0.0062% of total traffic by 2026 (Source: www.linkedin.com) — a view reflecting zero-sum thinking that may underestimate conversion and niche popularity, but which underscores how small the base is. Influential SEO consultant Kevin Indig even suggests ChatGPT could rival Google by 2030, implying only very gradual gains in the next 4–5 years (Source: ppc.land).

A June 2025 analysis by Ahrefs (as cited by Indig) found AI-search traffic still only ~0.5% of site visits—though growing—but projected that AI could drive as much value as traditional search by ~2027 (Source: ppc.land). Taken together, these data points suggest that **ChatGPT's share of referral traffic will remain small in absolute terms through 2026**. Even in an aggressive growth scenario, it would likely be *only one of several channels*, far smaller than the top sources.

Summary of 2026 estimates: Drawing on current data and trends, we estimate that for the median website, ChatGPT will contribute on the order of a few tenths of a percent to a few percent of total traffic in 2026, with wide variation by niche. Very few would exceed 5%, and for most it will still be in the sub-1% range. This conclusion is cautioned by the following: (a) small changes in ChatGPT design or policy could dramatically alter outcomes (e.g. if ChatGPT started to embed full articles instead of linking, referrals could collapse); (b) user adoption assumptions are speculative post-2025. We discuss these uncertainties next.



7.1 Future Factors and Uncertainties

- Search Engine Behavior: The outlook for ChatGPT referrals is closely tied to what Google, Microsoft, and others do. If Google makes Al Overviews the default and users stop clicking, then ChatGPT might take a larger role as an alternative answer source. Conversely, if Google's generative answers satisfy more queries, ChatGPT might actually face more difficulty (since those queries never reach it). One report suggests over 88% of Google's Al answers are followed only by a click if the user explicitly chooses "show more," implying that many get enough info within Google (Source: ppc.land). This could mean Google's dominance endures in the near term, modestly capping ChatGPT traffic.
- Al Partnerships and Plugins: Microsoft's investment in OpenAl means ChatGPT will increasingly embed with Bing and Edge browser. We might
 see a situation by 2026 where a large fraction of Bing queries are answered by ChatGPT-style AI (this is already underway). If so, referral traffic
 might not change (since that's still search traffic, just Al-powered). However, the Microsoft Copilot app could become an important referrer itself.
 By contrast, if ChatGPT richly integrates with platforms like Google Search (e.g. Google's Gemini transitions) or Apple's Safari, that could either
 draw from or redirect ChatGPT's own traffic.
- Developer tools and in-site AI: Many websites are adding AI-driven widgets or bots for customer service. These are technically still ChatGPT/LLM in some cases, but a click on those might not count as "chatgpt.com" referrals. The proliferation of site-specific AI might 'lock in' visitors. In the opposite direction, OpenAI and others are experimenting with "Knowledge Static AIs" that crawl and answer using a publisher's data (e.g. rendering the site's content inline). If those are implemented, traffic might stay on-site rather than counting as a referral.
- Regulatory and legal developments: Lawsuits like NYTimes vs OpenAI (filed mid-2024) could change the dynamic. If OpenAI is forced to pay
 for content licenses or restrict content use, ChatGPT might reduce its citations or altogether bypass linking. Alternatively, governments could
 mandate open linking (as is already debated in EU policy). These could significantly raise or lower ChatGPT's referral propensity by 2026.
- User Adoption Trends: It's plausible that ChatGPT's user growth slows, hits plateaus (due to costs, saturation, or competition). If growth stalls at a few hundred million users, then any referral channel size is capped. On the other hand, if ChatGPT becomes embedded in consumer devices (like smart home assistants, cars, etc.), usage could surge. We note Sam Altman's claim (mid-2025) that weekly users surpassed 800 million if that's accurate, baseline demand is huge.
- Quality of ChatGPT answers: Currently, ChatGPT sometimes hallucinates or avoids linking. If the model improves reasoning and starts
 consistently providing source citations (as some evidence suggests, e.g. GPT-4 citing sources more often), referral traffic should increase. On
 the other hand, if ChatGPT becomes a closed "search" (offering paid monthly tools with paid content), it might rely less on external links.

Because these factors are unpredictable, our estimates for 2026 should be seen as illustrative rather than definitive. They hinge on the assumption that ChatGPT continues to drive modestly increasing but still not massive referral volumes. The two tables and many analyses above all point to strong growth trends but very low current bases; our central judgment is that "lowest common denominator" for most sites is a fraction of a percent share by 2026.

8. Discussion: Perspectives and Strategies

8.1 Diverse Views in Industry

Our findings largely align with those in the SEO and analytics industry: ChatGPT is *something to watch*, but not yet a dominant traffic source. For instance, Search Engine Journal titled their analysis "ChatGPT referrals remain minimal" (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com), echoing the view that despite growth, the impact is limited. Similarly, a LinkedIn marketing expert stated (paraphrased) that ChatGPT accounted for mere thousandths of a percent of traffic and predicted it would stay negligible (Source: www.linkedin.com). In contrast, some analysts (e.g. Kevin Indig, PPC.land) argue that ChatGPT's structural advantages could lead to exponential growth, ultimately rivaling Google (Source: ppc.land).

Real-world practitioners show a spectrum: many content marketers are skeptical or frustrated, feeling ChatGPT has not delivered clicks. Others are optimistic, noting the quality of traffic it gives. For example, Grant Hendricks (BlackBean) recognizes the high engagement of ChatGPT referrals and is actively exploring "Al referral optimization" (Source: blackbeanmarketing.com). Technical SEOs are starting to add "Al visibility" to their metrics – akin to tracking search ranking.

8.2 Recommendations for Websites

Given the current and projected state, most websites should take a balanced approach:



- · Continue core SEO efforts. Since search remains by far the biggest referrer, optimizing for Google/Bing is still the primary source of traffic.
- Monitor AI referrals. Set up analytics to identify chatgpt.com or other AI domains as referrers. Use tools like Similarweb's AI Traffic Tracker or GA4 custom reports (Source: opentools.ai). Even if the share is small, tracking it over time can give early warning of shifts.
- Enhance content discoverability. Work on technical SEO tactics that also help Al: for example, using clear H1/H2 structure, schema markup for FAQs or articles, and ensuring pages load fast. As [20] suggests, content should be "machine scannable".
- Leverage partnerships. If possible, consider licensing deals or APIs with AI companies. Being an official data provider to ChatGPT (as some publishers are) may ensure your content is used and cited properly.
- Test AI platforms directly. Use ChatGPT or other LLMs with your site's topics and see if and how it cites your site. For critical FAQs or product info, manually optimize answers. Some brands have created official ChatGPT plugins (e.g. for travel booking) to direct the bot.

Overall, **don't panic** over ChatGPT but be proactive. A minority of traffic now means you have time to adapt. The biggest wins will come to sites that produce high-quality content that AI tools favor – namely, authoritative, well-organized answers to specific questions.

8.3 Future Research Directions

This field is still opaque in many ways. Open questions include:

- Quantifying ChatGPT referrals precisely: As analytics mature, we hope for more granular data (for example GA4 dashboards that filter ChatGPT vs search). SEO companies are building tools for "AI visibility" (Source: www.linkedin.com) – future editions of this report should leverage those metrics.
- Consumer behavior studies: How do users interact with ChatGPT referrals? Do they trust them as much as search results? Analytics firms' clickstream data give some insight, but surveys or lab studies (as CAPRA & Arguello's research into search/Al integration (Source: arxiv.org) would be valuable
- **Economic impact:** Will the high conversion rates reported for AI visits (Source: ppc.land) continue? If ChatGPT traffic yields disproportionately many sales or leads, even small shares could be significant for some businesses. Marketers should measure ROI on AI-sourced leads.
- Global and segment differences: Most current data is U.S.-centric or English-language. ChatGPT is blocked in China, but growing elsewhere.
 And user demographics skew young, tech-savvy (Source: searchengineland.com). Studying adoption across regions/languages is important for forecasting.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of ChatGPT has indeed added a new referral channel to the web traffic ecosystem. By 2025, ChatGPT was regularly sending tens of millions of visits to the largest websites. However, for the vast majority of sites, ChatGPT's contribution to referral traffic remains tiny. Multiple independent data sources consistently find ChatGPT referral shares measured in *tenths of a percent* for typical websites (often even much less) (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com) (Source: datareportal.com) (Source: searchenginejournal.com) (Source: growing rapidly (100% or more annually)), the base is so small that by 2026 most websites will still see only a low-single-digit percentage of their traffic from ChatGPT.

It bears emphasizing that these conclusions are evidence-based. We have drawn on Similarweb's category analyses (Source: www.similarweb.com), Semrush clickstream reports (Source: searchengineland.com) (Source: datareportal.com), publisher case studies (Source: digiday.com) (Source: datareportal.com), publisher case studies (Source: datareportal.com), source: <a href="datareportal

Looking ahead to 2026, ChatGPT's share of referral traffic will depend on how generative AI evolves. If ChatGPT doubles its user base and becomes more "click-happy," shares could edge up modestly – perhaps 1–2% for many sites, slightly more for tech-savvy ones. If Google's AI features extract most queries or if publishers largely lock ChatGPT out, growth will be much slower. Either way, the evidence suggests that most sites will still get the lion's share of their traffic from search, social, and other referrals, not from ChatGPT.

Thus the salient message for website owners and marketers is: **stay informed and adaptive, but don't assume ChatGPT will make or break your traffic in 2026**. Instead, monitor emerging trends, optimize your content as usual, and keep an eye on the fraction of referrals coming from AI bots. Over time, this channel may become more important – and by 2030 some experts think it may rival search – but in the near term it is growing slowly



from near-zero. Our research, grounded in a wide array of data, provides the basis for this conclusion. It also highlights that generative AI is reshaping search behavior, and we will continue to track how that behavior translates (or doesn't) into website visits.

References: (Key sources include Similarweb and Semrush industry analyses (Source: searchengineland.com) (Source: www.similarweb.com), TechCrunch and Digiday reporting on news referrals (Source: techcrunch.com) (Source: digiday.com), SearchEngineJournal and SearchEngineLand studies of publisher/SMB data (Source: www.searchenginejournal.com) (Source: searchengineland.com), Statcounter market-share release (Source: www.prnewswire.com), and other SEO industry reports (Source: searchengineland.com) (Source: blackbeanmarketing.com).)

Tags: chatgpt referral traffic, seo, generative ai, website traffic analytics, ai search, traffic sources, digital marketing trends

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